

The Ohio State University

Sociology 345: Contemporary American Society

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Lecture 13: Democratic America and Political Inequality

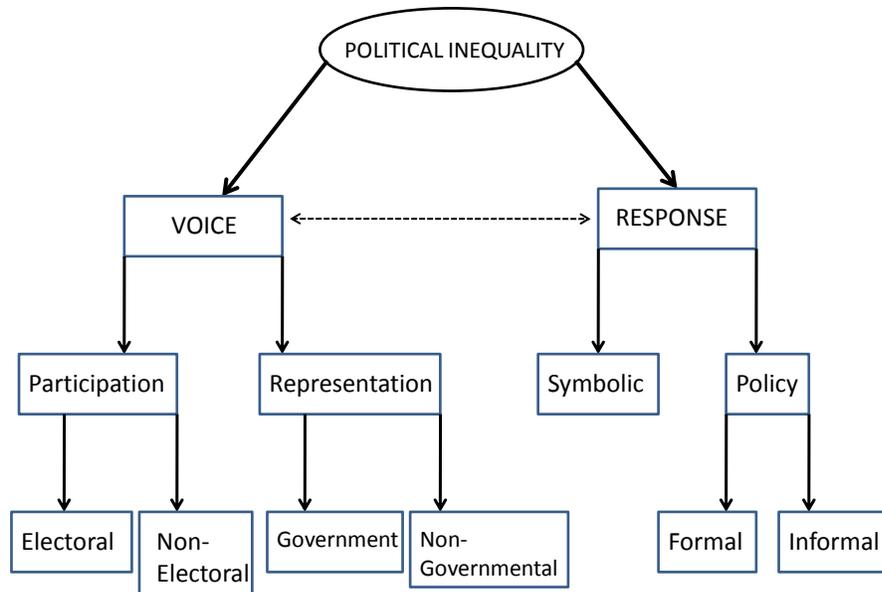
What is Inequality?

Inequality is a situation in which people have unequal access to scarce and valued resources in society. Inequality is a social structure: it existed before societal members were born and will likely persist well after they die, and no one individual can change it.

There are various types of inequalities. Because any resource can be a basis for inequality, it is useful to talk of particular types of inequalities. For example, economic inequality is usually measured in terms of income or wealth, where some have more and some have less. Educational inequality can be measured by educational outcomes, like high school degree, or college degree, or GPA, where some have higher and some have lower. Health inequality can be measured by access to health insurance where some have and some do not, and some have better and some have worse.

Political inequality and Power

Political inequality is structured differences in who influences the decisions of decision-makers. Decision-makers can be school councils, local government, state government and federal government (anyplace where politically-based decisions are made). The concepts of politics and power are related. In its simplest form, **Power** is a situation in which people have the ability to realize their wants, desires and needs even though others oppose them. Power relationships are everywhere where people have opposing interests: employers and employees, professors and students, wives and husbands, parents and children. Political resources are a sub-category of power. We can argue whether everything one does is political (for example, is where you shop a decision with political implications? Is what television show you watch also a political decision?); we will restrict ourselves to more obvious political relationships, focusing on people and their government.



Above is a conceptual diagram of the elements of political inequality. Voice refers to how constituencies express their interests to decision-makers, either directly or through representatives. Voice has two main components, participation and representation, each with subcomponents. Participation can either be electoral – such as voting or standing for office in elections – or non-electoral, such as attending a demonstration, contacting a public official, or joining a political organization, among others. Representation is having one’s political voice interpreted by a person or an organization and transmitted to the decision-making body. Government representation refers to those individuals and government agencies whose function is to listen to the interests of their constituency. Examples include parliamentarians, Ombudsmen, and special offices directed by the government. Non-governmental representatives include NGOs that can be either non-profit or for-profit and whose function is to transmit the interests of their selected constituency to decision-makers. These include non-violent organizations such as Kongres Kobiet in Poland and the NAACP in America, to violent organizations such as the IRA in Ireland or Hamas in Gaza. These people and organizations who interpret voices may not be expressly or directly appointed by their constituency.

Response refers to how decision-makers act and react to their constituencies, and take the forms of symbols and policy. Policy can be defined as a deliberate plan of action to guide decisions and achieve some specific outcomes, with the intention of providing guidelines for future, related decisions. The difference between a symbol and a policy is that symbolism lacks these specific guidelines; they are more likely to be limited-time events, such as “Black History Month” in the U.S. or “The Decade of the Roma” as pronounced by the United Nations. Symbolic responses include a speech on the parliamentary floor in favor of some constituency to introducing – but not passing – legislation. To

declare a “War on Poverty,” for example, is symbolic in the absence of policy measures. Symbolic responses can have measurable consequences for the extent of political inequality.

Policy has two main forms: formal and informal. Formal policy refers to legislation, judicial precedent or executive directives that are written and have the force of law. Informal policy is essentially informal rules that lack force of law yet impact how decisions are made. For example, when a political party leader directs the organization to include more minorities in their candidate lists, this can either be formal within the party rule book or an informal rule, something that the rank-and-file know about but on which there is no paper-trail.

How Does Political Inequality Work within Democracy?

Democracy is a term with a lot of conceptual baggage. After religion, democracy is probably the most talked about thing in the world.

Democracy can be understood in many ways. The constitutions of the U.S., the West, and many others purporting to be democracies outline the basics of democracy, and focus in on establishing formal rights, including that of political participation. All groups are considered politically equal – except for migrants of various types, and some other groups. For most, rights to be heard and represented are guaranteed: these are the “ideals” of democracy. In terms of formal rights only, across very diverse countries the “level” of democracy is more or less equal. If formal democracy is just formal rights, then we would expect no difference between countries in political inequality.

Establishment of Formal Democratic Rights: Comparing the Constitutions of the U.S., France Russia, and China

For example, in the U.S., the first Amendment 1 - Freedom of Religion, Press, Expression, says that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

In the French constitution, the preamble states that “The French people solemnly proclaim their attachment to the Rights of Man and the principles of national sovereignty as defined by the Declaration of 1789.” The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, Approved by the National Assembly of France, August 26, 1789, article 6 states, “Law is the expression of the general will. Every citizen has a right to participate personally, or through his representative, in its foundation. It must be the same for all, whether it protects or punishes. All citizens, being equal in the eyes of the law, are equally eligible to all dignities and to all public positions and occupations, according to their abilities, and without distinction except that of their virtues and talents.”

In Russia, Article 29 states that “Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought and speech; Propaganda or campaigning inciting social, racial, national or religious hatred and strife is impermissible. The propaganda of social, racial, national, religious or language superiority is forbidden; No one may be

coerced into expressing one's views and convictions or into renouncing them; Everyone shall have the right to seek, get, transfer, produce and disseminate information by any lawful means. The list of information constituting the state secret shall be established by the federal law. The freedom of the mass media shall be guaranteed. Censorship shall be prohibited," Article 30 states that, "Everyone shall have the right to association, including the right to create trade unions in order to protect one's interests. The freedom of public associations activities shall be guaranteed; No one may be coerced into joining any association or into membership thereof, and Article 31 states that "Citizens of the Russian Federation shall have the right to gather peacefully, without weapons, and to hold meetings, rallies, demonstrations, marches and pickets."

In China, Article 35, "Freedom of speech, press, assembly" states that "Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration."

To examine democracy we must go beyond formal statements of rights and examine how well democracy functions: to what extent elections are really free and fair, whether parties are allowed and the extent to which they offer ideological alternatives, whether government is responsive to citizen needs, and the extent to which citizens are hassled by the government (i.e. civil liberties). In contrast, political inequality is more limited in its focus over who influences government decisions.

Democracy is, in essence, the political environment in which political voices are amplified, heard and interpreted. The political environment raises or lowers barriers to people voicing their political interests that should not theoretically exist, but in reality, do exist. Democracy is the seedbed in which political inequality flourishes or withers.

The Claims of the APSA Task Force: Connecting Political Inequality to Other Inequalities

The 2004 APSA Task Force on "American Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality" argues that (a) economic inequality is rising, (b) racial and gender inequalities exist, and (c) these inequalities influence who makes the decisions, and what decisions are made, in government. The upshot is that the disadvantaged are lesser represented and lesser involved in political participation, government officials are less inclined to be responsive to the preferences of the disadvantaged, and public policy often fails to address the needs of the disadvantaged.

First, we should contend with the notion that economic inequality is rising. There are many measures of what is "economic" and what is "inequality:" for example, the gini coefficient of (annual, monthly, weekly) income, shares of income, distance (ratios, for example) between the top 10 percent and the median income, and so on. With time and patience, it is possible to make sense of tables, graphs and other statistical presentations that economists and other social scientists made. For the moment, let's take a short-cut, knowing we will have to spend that learning-time later. As the APSA Task Force and others point out, by almost all measures – income and wealth, especially – economic inequality in the U.S. has risen sharply since the 1970s and has continued an upward trajectory. Some argue the economic crisis influenced the trajectory a bit, but there is no indication of a dramatic reversal.

Next, we should contend with the notion of the disadvantaged. Inequality is always relative: it is a comparison of one thing to another. The disadvantaged are those who, in comparison to others, have less of the things people want and need. Oftentimes the disadvantaged are identified by their relative inequality in economic resources, social status and political power. In some societies such as the U.S., where personal traits are a marker for discrimination, race, ethnicity and gender also tell who is disadvantaged.

The APSA Task Force builds upon the well-established finding that position within the social and political structures impacts individual and group political influence. This means that who you are – measured in demographics like age, gender, race, socioeconomic background and current socioeconomic status, among others – influences your ability to have your voice heard by decision-makers and whether the decision-makers will respond to your demands.

The APSA Task Force makes another claim: as economic inequality rises, Americans are increasingly unable to realize the “ideals” of democracy, i.e. that everyone has equal voice and representation, and that government will be equally responsive to all needs. As we know, the formal rights established within democracies have not changed. What changed is the level of political inequality. In other words, as economic inequality rises, so too does political inequality.

Evidence of Political Inequality in Contemporary American Society

First, let’s look at voice inequality. Overall, as it is for most countries, political participation in the U.S. varies by mode of participation and by position within the social structure. Mode of participation is the way people participate: attending a public demonstration, signing a petition, contacting a government official, and so on.

Let’s take a recent (2009) Pew survey on “civic engagement.” <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/15--The-Internet-and-Civic-Engagement/2--The-Current-State-of-Civic-Engagement-in-America/2--Participation.aspx>

This represents a very wide range of participation types, some of which are very vague. For example, it includes signing a petition and attending an organized protest, but it also includes “work with fellow citizens to solve a problem in your community,” which can be political, or not, depending on the problem and what it means to “work with fellow citizens.” In all, Pew reports that 63 percent of Americans have done at least one political thing. However, one can question whether doing one political thing is truly a measure of the strength of civic engagement: half that did two political things, and half of that did three to four political things. Doing one thing seems to be a measure that exaggerates Americans’ political activity.

The Pew study finds that civic engagement is profoundly influenced by socioeconomic position: level of education and annual household income. Those with a high school (52%) or less than high school degree (44 percent) are far less likely than those with a college degree (79%) to do even one political thing, which can be considered as the bare minimum to sustain civic society. The college effect is

striking: even those with some college experience (72%) are much more likely to do something political than those with high school or less. Annual household income tells a similar story. Those with less than \$20,000 per year are far less likely (49%) to do the minimum than those with \$75,000 (74%) or even over \$100,000 (80%).

Political Participation and the Digital Divide

A quick note on the internet and political activity: some argue that the internet greatly expands opportunities for political participation and will become a leveling influence, where the rich and poor, educated and uneducated will have equal access and influence. This has not come to pass, and there are many reasons to doubt it will. The Principle of the Digital Divide – meaning that access to and skills in using the internet is divided by social structural position, where those with less have lesser access and lesser skills – governs the relationship between internet and political activity.

How does unequal representation matter? The idea goes like this: a representative's socioeconomic status and gender influences the life experiences they have to draw upon in creating and voting for policy. Representatives' policy preferences will tend to reflect the policy preferences of people like them (i.e. similar life experiences).

Socioeconomically, members of congress are unlike most Americans. They make \$174,000 a year, and according to the Center for Responsive Politics the median personal wealth in 2009 for members of Congress is \$911,510 (it was \$785,515 in 2008). Almost half of Congress are millionaires. Occupationally, most were lawyers, business-people (managers and CEOs) and other professionals.

Knowing that background experience influences life-outlook, it is reasonable to assume that members of congress think more like the better educated, wealthier citizens – the advantaged -- than other Americans.

Members of congress also tend to be male. Despite the large jump in percentage of women in congress since the 1990s, the overall percent is 17 percent.

Table 1. Percent Women in Parliament 2011

Rank	Country	Lower House	Upper House	Average
		% W	% W	% W
1	Rwanda	56.3%	34.6%	45.5%
2	Sweden	45.0%	---	45.0%
3	South Africa	44.5%	29.6%	37.1%
4	Cuba	43.2%	---	43.2%
5	Iceland	42.9%	---	42.9%
6	Finland	40.0%	---	40.0%
7	Norway	39.6%	---	39.6%
8	Belgium	39.3%	36.6%	38.0%
8	Netherlands	39.3%	34.7%	37.0%
9	Mozambique	39.2%	---	39.2%
10	Angola	38.6%	---	38.6%
10	Costa Rica	38.6%	---	38.6%
66	Venezuela	17.0%	---	17.0%
...				
67	Turkmenistan	16.8%	---	16.8%
67	United States of America	16.8%	17.0%	16.9%
68	Bosnia and Herzegovina	16.7%	13.3%	15.0%

Source: Inter-parliamentary Union (IPU) <http://www.ipu.org>

Does women’s unequal representation matter? The answer is nuanced and maybe too early to tell. Women in congress are more likely than men to introduce bills on equal pay, maternal health and leave, child-care and other policies that impact women’s lives. Yet, votes for these bills tend to go along party lines (Democrats more likely to initiate and vote for these types of bills) and, in general, women are no more likely than men to vote for them. Because of the small percentage of women in parliament, it is too early to know how boosting women’s percentage will change gender policy in the U.S. Maternal leave is a prime example of this. The Family and Medical Leave act allows Americans 12 weeks on unpaid maternal leave; Poland, in contrast, allows for 17 weeks of paid maternal leave, and up to 21 paid weeks if the father does not take his paternal leave.

Overall, the wealthy, male composition of congress means that, as a whole, congress will tend to reflect the interests of wealthy males.

Does inequality in political participation and representation matter? This is a tough question, in part because of the vague way political participation and representation generates a political outcome. In some cases, a call to a Senator can influence their decision. In other cases, not, and rarely does a single public demonstration influence government decision.

Let's look first as to whether the legislative branch listens to everyone equally. There are few studies on this, and to my knowledge there is no cross-national study. Larry Bartels' (2008) book, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*, specifically Chapter 8, "Economic Inequality and Political Representation," details his attempt to study it. Bartels writes,

"Using both summary measures of senators' voting patterns and specific roll call votes on the minimum wage, civil rights, government spending, and abortion, I find that senators in this period were vastly more responsive to affluent constituents than to constituents of modest means... views of constituents in the upper third of the income distribution received about 50% more weight than those in the middle third, with even larger disparities on specific salient roll call votes. Meanwhile, the views of constituents in the bottom third of the income distribution received no weight at all in the voting decisions of their senators. Far from being "considered as political equals," they were entirely unconsidered in the policy-making process" (253-4).

Bartels argues that social structural position – measured in terms of income – influences how American Senators vote on the issues of the day. Senatorial votes align with the more affluent citizens, and not at all with the truly disadvantaged.

To make the leap between inequality in political participation and representation and political inequality, we have to combine these findings. It goes something like this: the advantaged members of society tend to be more politically active, meaning that they are more vocal. They also tend to have members of congress that share their background. As government hears about the needs of the advantaged more so than the disadvantaged, and thus tends to be more responsive to the interests of the advantaged. Thus, we can conclude that economic inequality influences both voice inequality and response inequality.

We do not know whether this situation is changing, or has changed. We can reasonably suspect that, as society polarizes further into advantaged and disadvantaged, these inequalities will grow, too. More data needs to be marshaled to understand the dynamics of this likely process.

Inequality in Government Response

From Bartels' study, we see evidence that political inequality of voice influences government response. There are other factors that influence response inequality.

The first is the influence of interest groups. In the American democratic ideal, all groups have the same opportunity to influence government decisions. In reality, this is not so. The APSA Task Force report finds that interest groups differ by level of resources, and that level of resources influences government policy. Affluent and well-educated groups articulate their interests best, and have the time and money to woo candidates and elected officials.

Campaign contributions are another major factor, with the goal being access to the ears of decision-makers. Corporations have the capacity to give millions of dollars, a capacity beyond the reach of

almost all Americans. And now that the Supreme Court ruled that corporations have the same free speech rights as people, their capacity to donate and lobby grew even more. Because corporations are interested in access, they tend to give the most to whomever is in power, and favor Republicans only slightly, though it depends on the issue. <http://www.opensecrets.org/industries/>

Commercial Banks			
Year	Democrats	Republicans	Difference
2002	\$2,596,053	\$4,662,282	\$2,066,229
2008	\$4,923,876	\$5,427,228	\$503,352
2010	\$4,328,472	\$5,025,709	\$697,237
Pharmaceuticals			
Year	Democrats	Republicans	
2002	\$1,576,623	\$3,960,971	\$2,384,348
2008	\$5,910,221	\$4,907,097	(\$1,003,124)
2010	\$6,988,878	\$5,487,777	(\$1,501,101)

Case Study of Political Inequality: Ohio School Budget Fight 2011

Since the economic crisis, AKA the Great Recession, almost all U.S. states face a deficit, which they characterize as a crisis. The goal of most budget makers, then, is to cut funding. Education is not exempt. Wealthier school districts, located in the suburbs, depend far less on state funds than poorer districts. Wealthier district schools depend more on property taxes, including the tangible personal property tax (defined as tax on business properties). Poorer districts depend heavily on state funding.

In March of 2011, the State House Republicans, with consultation of Gov. Kasich (R), unveiled their yearly budget. Predictably, the budget consists of spending cuts and freezes, including to K-12 schools. The budget is designed to cut more state funds from wealthier school districts and much less, if at all, in poorer school districts. In addition to state funding cuts, Ohio plans to phase out the tangible personal property tax.

The wealthy school districts protested.

“Taxpayers from those districts, many in traditional Republican territory, are ... concerned -- and downright angry. Hundreds of them have been giving GOP lawmakers an earful at recent community meetings.” (“Ohio GOP lawmakers plan changes to Gov. John Kasich’s education budget,” April 25, 2011 by Aaron Marshall, the Plain Dealer)

Under intense pressure, Representatives from the wealthier school districts reacted fast. They asked for an amendment that would cap the state funding at 20 percent¹. They also wanted school districts to be exempt from the phase-out of funding from the tangible property tax.

In this protest environment, representatives from wealthy, suburban districts revealed their philosophy: they do not want to fund poorer districts with cuts to wealthier districts:

"Not only are we subsidizing our schools, but we are subsidizing other schools," Rep. Nan Baker, a Westlake Republican said. "Where does that end for districts like mine?"

In the end, wealthier school district protests were successful. They received a cap on state budget cuts, and they delayed the phase-out of the tangible personal property taxes until 2013 "so that local governments and school districts wouldn't lose money from the phase-outs beyond the next state budget." In addition, the state agreed to increase funding for schools, even for ones in wealthy districts: "House Republicans added \$80 million to the school foundation formula, providing particular help to suburban districts that took hits under Kasich's plan." The final House vote in May fell along party lines: Republicans for it, Democrats against it². It goes to the Senate.

In the end, political protest by wealthy school districts influenced the Ohio state budget, mostly minimizing losses for themselves. Poorer school districts did not gain much, though they may gain a bit by the increased funding. Meanwhile, the budget cuts 3 billion in state funding for K-12 schools and allows more for-profit charter schools which cherry-pick the best students from poor districts to begin and compete against public schools.

¹ For example, in Franklin County Upper Arlington would face a 64% cut, while Whitehall would receive a 1% gain. See: http://blog.cleveland.com/metro/2011/03/ohio_schools_face_loss_of_stat.html

² http://www.cleveland.com/open/index.ssf/2011/05/divided_ohio_house_passes_budg.html